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Breakdown in security at U.S. Embassy should be no surprise--we asked for it

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WASHINGTON — We've had it coming for more than half a century.

For example, 25 years ago, I used to spend an occasional hour talking about Soviet-Chinese relations with a U.S. political officer in Moscow. As we sat looking out the embassy window toward the Moskva River, we propped our feet on an old-fashioned steam radiator and he got pretty frank about what our side thought of the great schism in the communist world.

While I doubt that I heard anything highly classified, I know now that if I did, so did the KGB. Not long after I departed from Russia, embassy security officials discovered a microphone planted behind that radiator, recording every conversation that went on in my friend's office.

It was one of many bugs detected in the old U.S. Embassy. Back in the '50s, friendly Soviet officials presented our ambassador with a carved replica of the great seal of the United States, to hang on the wall behind his desk. The grateful envoy

did not learn till some time later that the seal contained a microphone.

Relentless espionage efforts are a fact of life in Moscow, and have been since U.S.-Soviet relations began in 1933. Foreigners living there take for granted that their homes, offices and phones are bugged, that their local employees work for or report to the KGB. So routine is this assumption that when another bit of proof is uncovered, the tendency becomes just to shrug and laugh it off.

That attitude underlies the apparently disastrous breakdown of security in which two U.S. Marine guards reportedly opened the way into the Moscow embassy for Soviet agents.

If those allegations are proved true, the Marines involved must feel the full force of the laws they have broken and the nation they have betrayed. But if they alone are made examples, Soviet intelligence chiefs will be delighted.

However blatant the Marines' crimes may be, senior U.S. officials

in Moscow and Washington are guilty in a broader way. They include presidents, congressmen, secretaries of state, ambassadors, CIA directors and embassy security officers.

The most naive believer in Soviet good intentions realizes that Moscow conducts a permanent intelligence offensive against military, diplomatic and trade secrets of the rest of the world, particularly the United States.

We do the same against them. But our side is losing the contest. Aside from occasional coups and continuing miracles of electronic spying, we have been losing it day in and day out since it began. Because our society is open and theirs is closed, we may never get ahead to stay.

When something dramatic happens, we usually look around and acknowledge that our government has been handing the other side huge advantages for years. Sometimes our officials go so far as to throw up their hands in horror, or schedule a closed congressional hearing. And then we go on as before.

Until last summer, nearly 200 Soviet employees worked inside U.S. facilities in the Soviet Union. They worked in the snack bar, the consulate, the ambassador's residence, everywhere except the restricted areas

where top secrets supposedly were confined.

Every one of them was under the control of the KGB. One, a young woman named Violetta Seina, attracted Marine Sgt. Clayton J. Lonetree. They became sexually involved. As a result, embassy doors reportedly were opened at night for Soviet spies to run free inside. How many secrets were stolen, how many new bugs planted, how much damage done, may never be known.

Yet this case was absolutely predictable. Those dozens of Soviet employees were there every day, probing constantly for weak spots.

This weak spot was a young Marine, in vigorous health, officially denied the company of the Russian women who worked around him. True, in the globe-and-anchor emblem on his hat there are the words "Semper Fidelis." In a movie, that might guarantee his eternal faithfulness. But this was real life. Only later did his conscience catch up with his hormones.

Unless investigators have so fouled up the case that it cannot be successfully prosecuted, he and his buddy will pay dearly for what they did.

But what about the embassy security officer, whose job is to be paranoid, who allowed that most sensitive U.S. installation to be protected at night by only two young servicemen? What about the State Department officials who kept allowing dozens of KGB plants to work in the embassy even after repeated congressional warnings?

What about the intelligence directors, so intrigued by satellite and other high-tech spying that they ignore the potential of human spying? What about the policy-makers who campaign against minor leaks to the press, who are eager to spend millions to finance covert offensive operations in faraway jungles, but scrimp on protecting U.S. secrets in the heart of Moscow?

The buck doesn't stop at buck sergeants.